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Investing in Teachers For Student Success: The Teaching Fellows Program

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Capital City Public Charter School was founded in 2000 with a vision of an academic program built on progressive principles and research on educational best practices. An Expeditionary Learning school and CES affiliate, Capital City was not standard fare for graduates of the average teacher training program. From the beginning, it was clear that a critical challenge would be the recruitment and retention of teachers who were committed to experiential education and skilled in active pedagogies.

In response to this challenge, Capital City founders created our Teaching Fellows program, which has evolved over eight years but remains a core element of the school's approach to professional development and teacher recruitment. Each classroom in our school, which includes 240 pre-kindergarteners through eighth graders, is staffed by two full-time teaching professionals: a highly qualified lead teacher, who typically has at least two years of teaching experience prior to assuming this role, and a Teaching Fellow, who is usually a classroom novice. These two individuals embark upon a one- or two-year journey together during which they collaborate to plan engaging and standards-based "learning expeditions," meet the academic and social needs of the 25 students in their class, and challenge themselves to develop as educators and leaders.

The Teaching Fellows program represents a massive commitment of school resources, as the presence of two teachers in each class means that our staffing budget is quite large relative to the size of our school. However, the classroom presence of Teaching Fellows, who typically bring a wealth of experience outside of teaching, a gift for connecting with children via unusual talents and energy, and a commitment to learning from master teachers and developing their expertise as educators, justifies the expense. Other benefits of Teaching Fellows include an increased ability to provide differentiated instruction to small groups of students by virtue of having a second teacher in each classroom; the development of leadership capacity in our lead teachers, who mentor and guide their Fellows every day towards the achievement of specific professional development goals; and a ready-made candidate pool for lead teacher openings, which are often filled by former Fellows.

Teaching Fellows come to Capital City with varying backgrounds and credentials, and the school differentiates its support to meet the needs of each new Fellow. The program begins with a summer institute required for new staff, held the week before the return of experienced teachers. During this week, Teaching Fellows and other first-year teaching staff are introduced to the core programs and principles of our school: the CES Common Principles, Expeditionary Learning, the Responsive Classroom behavior management approach, our inclusion model, and Balanced Literacy instruction. Session facilitators utilize active teaching and project-based learning strategies, modeling for new Fellows the techniques they will use in the classroom.

After the school year begins, support for Fellows becomes multi-tiered. Through a bimonthly New Staff Seminar, mentor relationships with their lead teachers and the Professional Development Coordinator, and individually designed professional development plans, Fellows embark on a year of learning designed to meet their individual goals and prepare them to eventually assume the responsibility for their own classrooms.

New Staff Seminar

The New Staff Seminar meets twice per month, with one session occurring after school and the other during the school day, and is usually facilitated by our Professional Development Coordinator. Developed to support Teaching Fellows in their day-to-day classroom challenges and build on the theoretical ideas gleaned during

summer training, the seminar is the mechanism through which Capital City curriculum, instructional practices, methods for teaching our social curriculum and school culture are reinforced and practiced. New staff members also have the opportunity to ask questions, celebrate successes, share frustrations, and generally support one another in the common challenge of being new staff members.

Paralleling the workshop model we use with children, an instructional practice is introduced via a reading and/or presentation by the facilitator. Participants discuss, question and reflect on the practice together. Fellows plan a lesson in which they will implement the new practice, and between seminars, they try the practice with their students. Participants then discuss and debrief their experiences during a subsequent seminar meeting. The facilitator continues to model best pedagogy and practices as much as possible. During one session this year, students from a first grade classroom joined the instructor for a guided reading lesson, with Fellows observing the "action" and debriefing the lesson afterwards. Other aspects of the seminar include a cycle of peer observation and critique, presenting lesson plans for feedback from the group, and discussion/reflection of readings about various instructional practices.

Teaching Fellows themselves drive seminar content by bringing real classroom issues and challenges to the group. In late November, Alison Miller, a member of this year's cohort of new Teaching Fellows, described a scenario to the group about a small clique that had formed among five girls in her third/fourth grade class. This development was causing myriad social and academic problems for the clique itself and the classroom community at large. Drawing on a recent seminar reading, the group discussed the idea that even though this issue directly involved a small number of students, a problem-solving class meeting might be a good way to safely address it. The Fellow could present the situation to the group without singling out the clique participants, and the entire classroom community could brainstorm possible solutions. Alison brought this suggestion to her lead teacher, and the two of them implemented it the following week.

During the second semester, the cohort participates in Capital City's peer observation protocol. Each Fellow is videotaped teaching a lesson. During the next seminar meeting, the group watches the lesson and engages in a peer critique session that allows everyone in the group to offer feedback to their colleague and examine their own teaching practice in the targeted area. Sometimes one instructional or curricular area is chosen by the group, around which all videotaped lessons are taught. This allows for more and deeper conversations around one, specific content or instructional area.

The Apprenticeship Relationship

The chance to phase into teaching over time, instead of starting one's teaching career with the responsibility for an entire classroom, attracts Fellows to Capital City. Leensa Fufa, now a first/second grade lead teacher, had just finished her bachelor's degree at Georgetown when she learned about the Fellows program through another graduate. "I didn't have any credentials in terms of teaching, so I had time to figure out if this was what I wanted to do," she says. "The idea that I could be teaching, but still have an expert showing me the ropes, was really what brought me here."

Every lead teacher participates in interviewing Teaching Fellow candidates. Because the demands of teaching together for an entire school year can be extreme, attention is given to the match of personalities and working styles. The hiring process is often the first opportunity for newer lead teachers to be part of an interview team and consider their candidate priorities in terms of experience, qualities, and philosophy. Being part of the process also ensures the lead teacher's investment in the successful development of the Teaching Fellow after a hire is made.

The partnership between the lead teacher and Teaching Fellow begins with two weeks of professional development before the start of the school year. The entire staff spends time on team-building initiatives, designed to welcome Teaching Fellows and other new staff into our community. Plenty of time is allocated for cluster meetings, in which the two lead teachers, two Fellows, and the inclusion staff members for a particular multi-age group (e.g. pre-kindergarten/kindergarten, first/second) meet to plan the first six weeks of school and lay out the learning expedition for the fall.

By the first day of school, each lead teacher has planned for the process of scaffolding the Teaching Fellow's introduction to the classroom. Leensa remembers the first challenges of interacting with her first/second grade class as a new Fellow: "I spent the first six weeks figuring out how to talk to little children. I was an English major in college, and trying to communicate with first and second graders was hard. It seemed like

all the kids were falling out of chairs all the time! I was glad to have time as a teacher to ease into the year and figure out the class.”

From the first weeks of the year, Teaching Fellows are involved in small-group reading, writing, and math instruction. The lead teacher models an instructional practice, such as leading a 30-minute morning math activity, several times. The Teaching Fellow then tries out the practice, usually co-teaching alongside the lead teacher, and the two debrief later in the day about how things went. Soon, the Fellow is responsible for planning and running one or more reading groups, leading a morning meeting of the entire class twice or more each week, and managing classroom behavior using time-outs and logical consequences.

“Educators talk about the gradual release of responsibility to kids,” Leensa says. “We really do that with adults as well.” Because Capital City is a progressive school, the teaching methods and behavior management approach are not what the typical Teaching Fellow experienced when he or she was a student. “The idea of the social curriculum, taking that time to build community and create norms with kids, was very new to me,” Leensa recalls. “Kids teach each other, and often learn more from their friends than they would from you.”

One-on-One Support

Finally, each Fellow maintains a one-on-one mentor relationship with the Professional Development Coordinator. “Having one person that I know I can check in with, ask questions of, gather suggestions from, and express concerns to is extremely helpful,” Alison says. At the beginning of the year, the two set individualized goals for the Fellow’s professional development over the course of the year, and strategize about how these goals can be achieved, identifying professional development opportunities both inside and beyond the walls of Capital City.

The Professional Development Coordinator observes each Fellow monthly and offers feedback on his or her teaching. These observations usually focus on the goals set at the beginning of the year. Additionally, each Fellow observes at least two other lead teachers during the course of the school year. This practice allows for Fellows to see the best practices taught and discussed in the seminar, and exposes them to a variety of teaching styles.

Feedback from all stakeholders – parents, teachers, administrators and students – supports the conclusion that our Fellows program is a key contributor to our unique learning community. While the Teaching Fellows model requires a significant financial commitment, we have found that investing heavily in our teachers is critical for student success. Having two dedicated and talented educators in each classroom means a greatly reduced student/teacher ratio and more capacity for providing differentiated instruction. Moreover, the Teaching Fellows program gives Capital City a pipeline of highly trained lead teachers with experience using active pedagogies and fluency in their understanding of child development. These new lead teachers, in turn, become mentors of a successive cohort of Teaching Fellows – a cycle of professional growth that provides continuity in our classrooms and steady improvement in the quality of instruction our students receive.

Washington, D.C.’s Capital City Public Charter School is a small public charter school of choice for children Pre-K through eighth grade. Our mission is to enable a diverse group of children to meet high expectations, develop creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, and achieve deep understanding of complex subjects, while acquiring a love of learning and a strong sense of community and character. Capital City Public Charter School’s 236 students come from nearly every zip code in the city and represent a broad range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Capital City Public Charter School is expanding, opening an Upper School in Fall 2008; the Upper School is new small school in the CES Small Schools Project.

Related Resource

For a student perspective on Capital City Public Charter School, see “Why I Am a Strong Believer in My School” by Nnamdi Nweazeapu in *Horace* Volume 22, Issue 4.

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She is working with a design team of teachers, parents, students, and community members to open Capital City's Upper School campus in September 2008.

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